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### Abstract

From the Middle Ages to the present, the story of Judith of the Apocrypha' has fascinated the artistic community. The Book of Judith tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar's general, Holofernes, who lays siege to the Hebrew city of Bethulia, but who is defeated by Judith, whose charms he could not resist. While he lies in a drunken stupor, Judith decapitates him, returns to Bethulia to display his head, and thereby encourages her people to counterattack. Nebuchadnezzar's army is dispersed, and subsequently, Judith becomes a matriarch of Bethulia.

RENATE PETERS

## Subversion or Sub/Version: The Judith Myth in the Apocrypha and in Van Herk's Novel

From the Middle Ages to the present, the story of Judith of the Apocrypha<sup>1</sup> has fascinated the artistic community. The Book of Judith tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar's general, Holofernes, who lays siege to the Hebrew city of Bethulia, but who is defeated by Judith, whose charms he could not resist. While he lies in a drunken stupor, Judith decapitates him, returns to Bethulia to display his head, and thereby encourages her people to counterattack. Nebuchadnezzar's army is dispersed, and subsequently, Judith becomes a matriarch of Bethulia.

The Book of Judith is the precursor to a multitude of literary, iconographical, musical and cinematographic works which address political, psychoanalytical, anthropological and feminist concerns already latent in the original text. Yet the Judith myth itself, rather than a unique work of art in the Apocrypha, is a full-blown mythological cycle wherein the apocryphal book is but one version. The Judith complex is all at once related to such biblical figures as Jael and Sisera, as well as to Delilah, Ruth, Susannah and Salome, and to such classical figures as Lucretia, Circe, Medusa, Artemis and the Amazon women.

In post-Apocrypha versions, in both art and literature, a few allusions remind us of this classical heritage – allusions, for example, to the ancient goddess of the hunt in Artemesia Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*,<sup>2</sup> or the juxtaposition with Lucretia in Cranach's diptych (which Leiris analysed by comparing Judith to Medusa).<sup>3</sup> For the most part, however, artistic and literary treatments of the myth focus entirely on the Apocrypha version and are part of the biblical continuum; artists and writers commonly rely on the apocryphal story and reuse it, either explicitly or implicitly, in their works.

Until the early twentieth century, iconographers and writers focused on the Judith myth without major modifications to the primary text. From the Middle Ages to Giraudoux's play, all versions have been variations on the original theme in so far as they place their characters in the original biblical and mythological context, thereby adhering to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the story. It would be simplistic to say, however, that the later

versions of Judith are nothing more than a repetition of the primary myth. Kofman states quite à propos, 'Il y a autant de Judith possibles qu'il y a pour les hommes de possibilités de vivre l'Oedipe.'<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as long as the Judith figure remains within the Judeo-Christian tradition – a patriarchal tradition – the extra-mythic possibilities of the narrative are limited. Judith may well be portrayed as a heroic, good or saintly figure, as in many of the very early versions; a tragic figure, as in Hebbel's play; a character of comic proportions, as in Nestroy's parody of Hebbel's play, or Kayser's *Die jüdische Witwe* (where Judith becomes a kind of nymphomaniac surrounded by impotent old men); or she may even be Giraudoux's temptress who has in turn become tempted and seduced by Holofernes' vision of a physical paradise on earth.<sup>5</sup> Whatever her makeup, she remains what Mary Daly, in her book *Gyn/Ecology* calls an 'anomie'<sup>6</sup> – what Simone de Beauvoir calls the Other in her *Deuxième sexe*. De Beauvoir explains the paradigmatic structure of this ever-recurring representation of Judith when she writes,

Dalila et Judith, Aspasia et Lucrèce, Pandore et Athéné, la femme est à la fois Eve et la Vierge Marie. Elle est une idole, une servante, la source de la vie, une puissance des ténèbres; elle est le silence élémentaire de la vérité, elle est artifice, bavardage et mensonge; elle est la proie de l'homme, elle est sa perte, elle est tout ce qu'il n'est pas et qu'il veut avoir, sa négation et sa raison d'être.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the obvious potential for feminist commentary through the Judith story, however, few women artists and writers have recreated this myth. Beyond the work of Aritha van Herk<sup>8</sup> – the subject of this study – only the Baroque painters Gentileschi, Galizia<sup>9</sup> and Sirani,<sup>10</sup> and the early twentieth-century playwright Menschick<sup>11</sup> come to mind. But have any of these women succeeded in subverting the original text in such a way that a totally new image of the Judith figure emerges? – a Judith which breaks away from the constraints of the patriarchal, mythic figure and becomes a feminist model of the new woman. Or is the primary myth always a trap from which women writers and artists have tried in vain to escape? Is the subversion of a mythic text its eventual destruction, or does the subversion ultimately become only another sub-version of the myth? In an attempt to answer these questions, I shall compare the seemingly opposed figures of Judith of the Apocrypha and Aritha van Herk's modern counterpart.

The Judith figure of the primary text is, as contrasting analyses reveal, of an eminently ambiguous nature which justifies de Beauvoir's general dictum on myth: 'Il est toujours difficile de décrire un mythe; il ne se laisse pas saisir ni cerner, il hante les consciences sans jamais être posé en face d'elles comme un objet figé.'<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the Judith figure is indeed not an 'objet figé'; she is not merely sinner or saint, but a more complex character. For some she is a coquettish, sensuous, duplicitous murderess who does not merit a place in the Bible,<sup>13</sup> while for others her

deception is an essential feature in the making of a hero.<sup>14</sup> For some she is the castrating female who usurps man's role,<sup>15</sup> while for others she is an exceptionally virtuous woman.<sup>16</sup>

Yet for others the story of Judith is a striking example of feminism: she is the 'archetype of feminist revolt against a history made by men';<sup>17</sup> she is the 'female warrior of tradition' – a Joan of Arc figure – 'independent of male authority'.<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically, however, most authors who accentuate the feminism inherent in the story also allude to the essential weakness of the female hero because she is only an instrument chosen by God in the fight against evil power. Judith, as an archetype of feminism, appears to be a fantasy, according to Coote's evaluation: 'The story need have nothing to do with reality. In fact, it is often patriarchal societies, where male and female roles are sharply distinguished and women have a passive role, that in fantasy produce myths of a female savior.'<sup>19</sup> In other words, the Judith myth is a world turned upside down. But whereas the reversal of hierarchies is absolute here, it is also absolutely illusory. In fact, the fantasy only stresses the reality of patriarchy.

Whatever the illusory or fantastic nature of Judith, she nevertheless is Israel; her ambiguous nature is also the nature of her nation. As a symbol of the Hebrew nation, she reflects its particular status among the various Old Testament nations who submitted without resistance to Nebuchadnezzar's armies. She symbolizes Israel's exceptional status as a people chosen by God. Metaphorically speaking, Israel might be likened to a 'recurrent' virgin – Bethulia ('batulatu' translated as the biblical maiden, the daughter of Israel or the virgin)<sup>20</sup> – who had, at various times in her history, been violated, whose blood had been polluted, but who had risen from weakness to strength, from defeat to victory, and had recovered her purity. Under Holofernes' siege this 'maiden' is again powerless and weak. But with God's help, Bethulia – the 'biblical maiden' – rises again to glory and recovers her strength, as she had in times past.

Israel's reversals – its progression from powerlessness to power – is reflected in the very name 'Bethulia'. The city of maidenhood can also be translated to mean 'the Home of the Phallus'.<sup>21</sup> It goes without saying that the ultimate referent and source of power is God, the absent and omnipresent patriarch. It may well be that, as Daly argues, 'patriarchy is the religion of reversals' in so far as the presence of God manifests itself in His absence, and that 'the infinite absence of divinity in the patriarchal God is the ultimate scarcity – rarefied to the point of Zero'. But it is<sup>22</sup> equally evident that this absent and invisible God is a haunting presence, appearing in the form of patriarchy, in the profane realm of social hierarchies which relegate women to the lowest level in society.

As a woman, the Jewish heroine initially belongs to the lowliest of the low, for the prime *raison d'être* of the Jewish woman was to be married and to bear children: for her, barrenness was one of the greatest calamities.<sup>23</sup> Judith of the Apocrypha is childless and a widow; her status

as a childless widow places her at the same level with the stranger and the orphan.<sup>24</sup> In fact Judith belongs to the group of the 'lowly', the 'oppressed', the 'weak', the forlorn and those 'without hope' whom she includes in her prayer to God. As well, she is an outcast, exiled from society. Whereas Hebrew society dwells in the 'House of Israel', Judith by contrast does not dwell in the house, but, metaphorically speaking, in a nomad's domicile, a tent on top of the roof of her house. She is, in Victor Turner's terminology, 'betwixt and between' two states:<sup>25</sup> her childlessness and sterility place her between womanhood and virginity, and her widowhood places her between the living and the dead. The source of her ambiguity, which critics have repeatedly commented upon, lies in her being at once barren and a widow. As a woman in patriarchal society, she is liminal to men, but as a widow and 'virgin' she is particularly 'strange, incomprehensible, an inhuman paradox',<sup>26</sup> and has to be removed from society in order to neutralize the danger which may emanate from such ambiguity.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the community ostracizes her as a potentially powerful and dangerous force by marginalizing her. She is what Mayer calls an existential outsider<sup>28</sup> because of her sex and disposition, and she lives in volitional isolation because she accepts the role bestowed upon her.

Judith's reversal of status, as with all such reversals, takes place under privileged conditions, in extraordinary circumstances. Because she is ambiguous, Judith is a threat to order in an orderly society. Because she is ambiguous, she is a saviour of order in a society threatened with disorder. She brings chaos to the other world (Holofernes' camp) in order to restore order in her world. In other words, chaos and destruction create a world turned upside down in which the exception becomes the rule, in which, as Roger Caillois observed, acts formerly prohibited carry glory and prestige, and in which tricks and lies are appreciated.<sup>29</sup>

Reversal does not take place so much in Judith's world, as in the pagan world to which the norms of Jewish society do not extend. Judith carries out her deed in the name of God, but the Jewish God incarnate in the patriarchal structure of her society is absent in the pagan universe which she enters. Cut off from the rules of this world and not submitting to the norms of the other world – she does not share its customs – Judith is in a cultural no-man's-land, a nowhere, so to speak. But "'nowhere" is', in Colie's words, 'cosmically and geographically an *impossibilium*. Utopia is the place which is not. ... What "happens" in utopias is made up of elements opposite to the societies in which their authors had to live, looking-glass reflections on the defective real world.'<sup>30</sup> If utopia is nowhere, it is also, as Bartkowsky argues, 'anywhere but here and now'. It is 'what could be, might be, even what some say ought to be'.<sup>31</sup>

Judith's reversal from powerlessness over men to absolute power over Holofernes, from passivity to activity, from submissiveness to absolute freedom from restraint, is thus a fantasy of the powerless against the limits set by the rules of patriarchy. It is in Mieke Bal's words 'the

liberation of an always limited imagination'.<sup>32</sup> Limitless as a fantasy, the fantastic act is confined to a space outside patriarchal reality. But since the reality of patriarchy is all-embracing, it is also patriarchy which determines the limits and the value of this fantasy. Within the framework of biblical inversions – Edmund Leach refers to them as 'dialectical inversions'<sup>33</sup> – Judith plays a particular role. She is Eve and Mary, temptress and saint, both good and evil. She is the 'dreaded anomaly', 'the object of male terror',<sup>34</sup> the seductive woman who is not what she appears to be and who spins a web of deception around her opponent to charm and destroy him.

In other words, when woman leaves her habitual place designed for her by the customs and laws of society – when she reverses positions – she becomes the Other to that society. She is literally out of place. Not only does Judith usurp and eliminate man's power by using his power – his sword – but in this ambiguous state, she is seen as the double-gendered, the phallic woman who takes away man's potency and administers death by decapitating an incapacitated, emasculated Holofernes. The 'realization' of this fantasy takes place hidden away in the darkness of night, in the realm of dreams or nightmares where structure and order give way to chaos and disorder.

This transgression of boundaries, this triumph of disorder, are enemy forces against the structure of patriarchy. Significantly, upon her return, Judith's first utterance is the affirmation of her sexual innocence; in other words, the confirmation of purity of her body and, by implication, of her soul, uncontaminated by temptations of otherness and difference. Yet in the aftermath of her deed, she temporarily becomes the leader of her people, a 'judge' or army general who plans the strategy and gives the orders for the rout of Nebuchadnezzar's hordes. After the enemy is vanquished, she assembles the women of Bethulia in a kind of victory parade, while the men of the community trail behind. Surrounded by her Hebrew sisters, she sings a song in which she taunts the men as 'the sons of the Titans' and 'tall giants' who nevertheless were too weak to defeat the enemy.

At this point, Judith has attained the power to create a matriarchal society (whose matriarch she would have been); she speaks of herself as the mother of her people – Israel as her infants, her children, her oppressed and weak people. Through these symbolic and ritual acts, Judith displays her power, her transgression of the boundaries of patriarchy. After her show of force, however, she resubmits herself to the patriarchal system. In the temple in Jerusalem, she re-avows her allegiance to the patriarchal God, and gives up her war booty – the vessels and bed chamber of Holofernes – in a kind of ritual of disempowerment.

Judith, the woman on top, out of place, nowhere, who reflects the defects of patriarchal hierarchies, returns to her place to submit to the established social system. To remove the ambiguity of her state of virgin-widowhood



and to return to a place within her society, Judith ultimately renders herself harmless. She returns to her estate and, in this restricted domain, becomes the ruler over her household. Symbolically she becomes a figurehead, a matriarchal persona without real political power, though 'honoured throughout her time in the whole country'. According to the patriarchal system of values, she attains the ultimate status for a woman in a theocratic society where matriarchy remains a fantasy and where the Phallus continues to reign supreme.

As I stated earlier, the depiction of Judith by women writers and artists is rare. Artemesia Gentileschi's Judith paintings contrast with depictions by other artists, as Garrard points out:

The character she has created — neither beautiful, nor virginal, nor seductive — is nothing less than a reintegrated female hero, no longer dichotomized into saint or sinner, Mary or Eve, 'good' or 'evil'. She is rather a life-like individual ... who, through her deed, has acquired the power that we associate with the heroic consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

The contemporary writer, Aritha van Herk, goes a step further. In her novel *Judith* she expands on the link between Judith and Artemis (already made by Genteschi) by adding a third mythological figure, Circe. Van Herk creates a rather unusual synthesis in which the Greek goddess of the hunt and Homer's sorceress merge with the biblical heroine.

That van Herk's infusion of Greek mythology into this biblical text is subversive to patriarchy is, perhaps, questionable. But van Herk's other contribution to the Judith cycle brings more directly into question the subversion of mythology. The new aspect which van Herk brings to Judith is that she trivializes her; she brings Judith down to earth. Rather than a mythic figure, van Herk's Judith is a commonplace character — a pig farmer's daughter. By 'trivialized' I do not mean to deprecate van Herk's novel; rather I am using the word in the sense which Daly gives it — trivialization as a counterstatement to patriarchal values of 'worth'.<sup>36</sup>

Set in an agricultural community in Alberta, where the principal character, Judith, raises pigs, van Herk's novel is far removed from the original myth. However, on a symbolic level, van Herk's novel retains most of the elements of the original tale. Thus the original characters reappear, transformed into commonplace *personae*. God, the principal player, becomes Judith's father, Jim; Mannasseh, Judith's weak husband who dies during the barley harvest, becomes the weak and clumsy boyfriend, Norman, who in the course of van Herk's narrative fades out of Judith's life. In the Apocrypha, Judith has a female servant and helper who accompanies her to Holofernes' tent and whom Judith sets free after Holofernes' death. In van Herk's fiction, Judith's mother plays a similar role: servant to both her father and daughter, she is later replaced by the mother-substitute and friend, Mina — the servant set free to become a companion. Holofernes of the Apocrypha becomes Judith's boss and city lover, as well as the symbol



of male dominance and power. And Achior, the renegade in Holofernes' camp (who eventually changes sides and converts to Judaism), becomes Judith's domesticated lover, again named Jim, who converts to her world view.

As a childless widow the apocryphal Judith is physically exiled from her community. The Canadian Judith is symbolically exiled. She lives in psychological isolation in a patriarchal society where she feels outcast from both the dominant male society and from her female companions. She too does not have a place in the 'house' – in van Herk's narrative the pig barn symbolizes the house where her father is the master. Judith is a passive onlooker who lives distanced from the female community symbolized by the sows; she is an object among objects, and all objects are the common property of her father, the patriarch.

But van Herk's story is not simply a modern-day retelling of the ancient tale. For example, the biblical Judith, in the name of God, sets out to free her city from Nebuchadnezzar's hordes. She returns to her community and resubmits to the patriarchal values of her society. For Van Herk's heroine, however, Nebuchadnezzar's hordes are everywhere, they are everyman. Consequently, the modern Judith sets out to achieve freedom from everyman. She does not act in the name of God; rather she sets out to destroy her God – an overwhelming father-figure and the symbol of a male-dominated society in which all men she encounters are but an extension of this father-image. The modern Holofernes, her city lover, is consequently one among many enemies. Thus, although Holofernes' camp is the city, his power is everywhere; he represents the patriarchal value system which van Herk's Judith, unlike her biblical counterpart, escapes.

Van Herk's Judith passes through three stages: childhood, where she is fixated on the father-figure; youthful rebellion against the male God, whom she, at first, internalizes; and finally, her progressive liberation from him. Her Bethulia is the Alberta countryside of her childhood; the city to which she escapes is her place of youthful rebellion; and her countryside pig farm, to which she returns from the city, becomes her new Bethulia – essentially a matriarchal utopia. In more general terms, the three stages are the evolutionary path which a woman must choose in order to transcend her exile or alienation, in order to be in complete harmony with herself and with the world.

Van Herk's novel deals with Freudian concerns as a metaphorical extension to the religion of monotheism, but the novel also deals with feminist concerns which go beyond Freudian interpretation. In Freudian terms, van Herk shows a Judith-figure whose bond with her pig-farming father, Jim, is of an eminently incestuous nature. He is the little girl's protector, whose 'hand swallowed hers completely and who in the twilight ... loomed colossal beside her' (p. 12); he is her jailer 'holding her like that, captive' (p. 13); he is her master whose demands she silently carries out (p. 75); he is 'her all-knowing father with a cure for everything' (p. 124); he is the almost-

lover, whose little girl she is, who hugs 'her body tight and close to his chest, her bones almost crushed in his arms' (p. 160), 'holding her against him so tightly, as if he would pour all his thick, hard life into her' (p. 162).

Judith's father is ever-present, even after his death, so that she is incapable of blocking 'out the shape of her father's face, stern in death as it had never been in life' (p. 149). He controls her life beyond his own life: 'It was some other person directing,' she says, 'and I was just carrying out orders' (p. 98). His presence is manifest in his absence, and his absence is a phantasmagoric presence, an alienating nothingness in his daughter's life. The relationship between the daughter of Israel and her God was glorified in the Apocrypha. Van Herk's novel, on the contrary, denounces the relationship between father and daughter as an eminently debilitating force keeping women in a system of bondage – a bondage, however, based on a complicity between the captor and his victim. There is no escaping this colossal presence of the ancient patriarch whom the daughter desires in guilt and shame: 'thick and bent as he was, it was really him she wanted' (p. 125).

Contrary to Freud's argument as to the onesidedness of the daughter's desire for the father, van Herk shows reciprocity of desire, echoing Irigaray who, in her psychoanalytical study *Speculum de l'autre femme*, pointed out this reciprocity:

Ainsi, n'est-il pas simplement vrai, ni d'ailleurs tout à fait faux, de prétendre que la fillette fantasme d'être séduite par son père, parce qu'il est tout aussi pertinent d'admettre que le père séduit sa fille mais que, refusant de reconnaître et réaliser son désir – pas toujours il est vrai – il légifère pour s'en défendre.<sup>37</sup>

Since any realization of incest remains taboo, another form of seduction replaces actual incest: a masked seduction which, according to Irigaray, takes the form of the law. In the Apocrypha, God represents the Law, while in van Herk's novel the father is the lawgiver and Judith is the ever-pleasing object of her father's rule. She is marked by him, she belongs to him, she is his little girl to the exclusion of all other men and women.

Since the father-figure dominates, the mother-image remains pale by contrast. In a patriarchal society, the phallus is the symbol of value, while the non-phallic mother, in turn, becomes anti-value, so to speak, to the colossal presence of the patriarch. Although Judith recognizes her physical resemblance to her mother ('her mother's face, smooth and younger, looking back at her from the mirror' – p. 43), she rejects the mother-image. She also rejects her mother's world as one of simplicity (as opposed to her father's world of complexity – p. 62). She rejects the womb from which she grew as non-phallic and consequently she rejects her own being as a woman. She rejects her mother as the passive, silent servant to father and daughter alike: 'Beside him her mother was still and dull' (p. 128).

Judith's relationship with her father precludes, as rivals, any relationship with other women. And this 'object-cathexis' towards the father, as Freud would say, prevents Judith, as well, from enjoying hetero-sexual relationships. The incestuous bond exists, but its reality is denied, placed under a taboo and idealized. Sex with the other, under the law of the father – in this case with her boyfriend Norman, the 'normal man', the modern counterpart to the weak Manasseh of the Judith myth – would tarnish Judith's image of man as the Godfather and Superman. In fact, Norman is this tarnished image. He is the pale reflection of the patriarch; he too thinks that 'she was his, poised on his chair to swallow her, his body in an attitude of possession' (p. 45). The patriarch incarnate, become sexual, sullies the idealized image. Judith can only feel hatred for this competitor who is but a 'clumsy fool' (p. 106) who thinks he has rights over her, 'his lips tilted in a smile of possession' (p. 107).

The bond between Judith and her father is a relationship of unequal partners. If the patriarch gives value to the daughter as Irigaray maintains, then their relationship is not only the traditional subject-object, male-female relationship one finds in a patriarchal society where the woman is equated with a child. In fact, the daughter is *nothing* without the value the father bestows upon her. Thus Judith's escape to the city is an attempt to create value for herself and to free herself from her father's debilitating, alienating presence. She physically severs her ties with the omnipresent father by moving away, but by no means does her rebellion – as is the essence of all rebellion – topple the patriarch.

As I stated earlier, the city in van Herk's novel, a place of luxury, license and 'lethargy', 'indulgence and submission ... food and alcohol ... and stale tobacco on her thick and furry tongue every morning' (p. 154), corresponds to Holofernes' camp. In this sense, van Herk's city recaptures some of the allegorical images found in Renaissance paintings where Holofernes incarnates *luxuria* and Judith represents *humilitas*. The modern Judith's boss, as the modern Holofernes, is a rich and successful businessman, brutal in his sexual demands, inconsiderate and ruthless towards women, who are but the objects of his whims. He is the true representative of the ever-recurring image of the original Holofernes.

Whereas the world of Judith's father isolated the heroine from sexual encounters, her father's physical absence eliminates taboos of that nature. Judith's move to the city is the first step away from her father's claim to exclusive ownership of her. Judith trespasses her father's law by having sex with her boss. But unlike her biblical model, the modern Judith does not reverse positions, does not become the woman on top, but repeats the subject-object, master-slave relationship. It may well be that van Herk thinks that such reversals lack credibility, they are indeed an illusion as long as the patriarchal structure itself is not put into question at the same time.

Thus, in van Herk's narrative, the modern Holofernes not only remains the master, but he truly becomes everyman, whose image is everywhere, 'in shaving-cream ads, in the dark-haired man three seats down, in someone waiting at the corner for the light to change' (pp. 44-45). He is an all-embracing presence, objectifying, 'holding her ... captive' (p. 13), physically imprinting his marks on her, and moulding her to the extent that she wills herself to be what her lover wants her to be: a faceless mask achieved by 'acts of barbarity she had committed on herself for him', a 'change he had orchestrated in her' (p. 175). Whereas Judith of the Apocrypha uses a mask as a deceitful means to charm and captivate her opponent with the ultimate intent to assassinate him, van Herk's heroine plays the traditional role of woman. Her ultimate intent by masquerading herself is to turn herself into an object of desire as a means to charm her lover. The price she pays is the symbolical death of her own being, the loss of her identity.

Judith's father, by giving value to the daughter, bestows upon her his identity; the daughter in turn rewards him by idealizing him. Similarly, Judith's city lover moulds her into his desired object. He is the father-boss made sexually accessible. In the city, the God of Judith's childhood seems to lose his power; he becomes frail and old, supplanted by his young competitor. As Judith's idealized image of the patriarch temporarily fades, she replaces it with the physical presence of everyman. But authentic freedom – an illusion in the biblical Judith's world – is a fantasy for van Herk's Judith as well. For when the father finally ceases to physically exist, he is more powerful than ever. Behind the face of everyman lurks the patriarchal image. To claim that God is dead or to affirm, as does Daly, that he is 'ultimately Nothing'<sup>38</sup> is to paradoxically affirm his everlasting presence. The lover can be abandoned, symbolically eradicated, but in order to achieve true freedom, the symbol of that power has to be destroyed.

In her final journey back to the countryside – to her Bethulia – Judith initially sets out to recover her father's world. She returns to farm life in a decision to fulfil her father's wish to raise pigs, and thus ultimately to satisfy her father's voracious desires. As I stated earlier, Judith's father was a pig farmer who ruled, like a feudal lord, over livestock and women alike. His daughter was a passive, insignificant onlooker, distanced from female companionship – the sows of the barn. Although the heroine in van Herk's novel appears to continue to be an instrument in her father's world, she in fact reverses that world. Judith moves from passivity to activity, from being ruled to ruler, from being an object of ownership to being proprietress, from woman to virago and warrior. This reversal – symbolically expressed by Judith having her long hair cut off<sup>39</sup> – manifests itself in her search for a new identity. The old Judith, reduced to insignificance under patriarchal rule, turns away from her biblical model towards what Daly calls the 'Prehistoric Background',<sup>40</sup> becoming both Circe and Amazon.

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Judith's progressive destruction of the all-powerful God results in a shift: the redirection of the object-cathexis toward a mother image - a shift in which the matriarchal element vanquishes the patriarchal one. She enters into an almost mystical union with her sows, transforming them into 'enchanted animals, Circe's humans' (p. 11). The 'cave-like barn' (p. 22) becomes a womb, where 'their common female scents mingle' (p. 25), a domain which Judith gradually conquers and which is off-limits to men. Similarly, she enters into a bond of love and friendship with her friend and mother-substitute, Mina. In van Herk's novel, Mina is the rediscovered and revalued mother figure. Although Mina, the mother of three sons (one of whom will become Judith's lover), is not especially different from Judith's own mother, she serves to emphasize the reversal which takes place within Judith - her shift towards matriarchy. Thus Judith does not, as she had in the past, consider her mother any longer as the silent servant, unessential in the world of the patriarch; rather the mother becomes essential in her own right as life-giver and life-sustainer.

Although van Herk believes that woman's essential tendency is to give life, she also shows woman's opposing tendency to struggle against male power in order to protect her rights. As 'the Amazon woman of Norberg' (p. 148), Judith, in a bar brawl, hunts down a jeering male crowd, 'a pack of howling coyotes ... brave because they were not alone, one supporting the other' (p. 142). Judith reverses positions, emerging as the victor, not over one man, but over everyman; in the process, she demystifies man as hero. His heroism falters and he abandons his courage when woman dares to defy him. As the Amazon woman of a village tavern, however, she also distances herself from the deadly violence of her ancestor warriors. Her defiance is far removed from, for example, the rage which Monique Wittig expresses in *Les Guerrillères*.<sup>41</sup> Rather, Judith's tavern fight dissolves itself into laughter.

Nevertheless van Herk's Judith is not free from the violence which characterized her ancestor of the Apocrypha, and by extension, the Greek magician, Circe. The primary scene of Judith slaying Holofernes reappears in van Herk's novel when Judith castrates the piglets. Dundes,<sup>42</sup> echoing Freud, interprets the decapitation of Holofernes as symbolical castration. Van Herk, merging the Greek magician and the biblical Judith, recreates this primary event.

While the mythical Circe symbolically emasculates men by changing them into swine, van Herk's Judith sets out to symbolically break the power of men, first by breaking the sharp teeth of the male offspring of her sows, and then later - outdoing her mythical ancestor - by castrating them. 'Not even Circe's turning men to swine could equal it' (p. 173). While Judith's father castrated the pigs alone - 'perhaps he did not want her to witness a male emasculating a male ... and saved himself from her discovery of his own sexuality' (p. 176), Judith's ultimate liberation from the patriarchal presence comes with the castration of her piglets, who are



rendered helpless, and passive under her knife. Judith literally unveils the male sex behind the phallus, thus demystifying the phallus and leading to 'her discovery of man's common humanity' (p. 176). This castration scene, in the presence of her future lover Jim, completes Judith's reversal of positions. An object in her father's world, Judith becomes the subject, objectifying the male, who in turn becomes a passive onlooker while she castrates her piglets. In the process, Judith symbolically castrates her lover, removing the mask of male superiority which hides his 'common humanity'.

God reduced to common man – Jim the father merged with Jim the lover – was a necessary synthesis in Judith's world. But this synthesis evolves further, so that common man is reduced to an object. In the final scene of the novel, Judith and Mina watch while a breeding hog services the sows. The two women crack jokes and mockingly applaud the hog's activities: 'The boar turned startled orange eyes on them as if caught doing something foolish' (p. 187). Perhaps echoing the laughter of her victory in the village pub, Judith's mocking gaze entirely objectifies the maleness of the hog. Finally, in Judith's world, while woman remains indispensable as protector, life giver and sustainer, man becomes only an instrument in the process of procreation – a breeding hog in van Herk's utopia – Ulysses revisited as the father to Circe's child. Van Herk's Judith recreates the Amazon woman, who bore children but maimed, killed or blinded her male offspring. Ultimately, she reinvents the biblical Judith who became the mother of her people.

Whereas the archetypal image of Judith as sinner or saint, as a power of darkness or the source of life is upheld in fiction until the early twentieth century, later variations upon the myth diverge more and more from the original. In earlier fiction the archetypal image remains intact. Writers used myth in the sense in which Sartre and Roland Barthes explained the term: for Sartre myth was a "'fragment d'idéologie" destiné à masquer la réalité d'une situation et d'un comportement";<sup>43</sup> for Barthes, 'le mythe avait pour charge de fonder une intention historique en nature, une contingence en éternité'.<sup>44</sup> Not only did writers uphold the ambivalent image of Judith, but this image described the reality of the ambivalence of woman. In other words, 'the mythical figures are symbols. These, it is said, open up depths of reality otherwise closed to us'.<sup>45</sup>

In van Herk's novel, the heroine of Bethulia undergoes a transformation. Her Judith becomes a modern woman in a world in which the absolutes of saint and sinner, good and evil, have become relative. Thus her fiction is less a repetition than a critical commentary on the traditional image of Judith. But does this *Verfremdung*, to use a Brechtian term, lead to the destruction of the myth, or is the archetypal image so powerful that it recovers itself despite van Herk's efforts?

In order to achieve the destruction of the archetypal representation of Judith, van Herk sets out to remove the heroine from the biblical setting



and to destroy the heroic qualities attached to the apocryphal image. Her heroine is not fighting for the survival of the status quo – patriarchal Hebrew society – but against male power and for the establishment of a new, matriarchal society. Quite clearly the trivialization of van Herk's Judith, together with the infusion of classical models into her text, add to the *Verfremdung* from the original. Nevertheless, paradoxically, despite van Herk's attempt to destroy the archetypal image, that image remains more powerful than ever. For Judith of the Apocrypha and her classical sisters share the same traits. All three are castrating warrior figures, and depending upon who gazes upon these symbols, these mythical heroines uphold the image man projects onto women as 'sadistic monsters'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, van Herk's Judith is not only Circe, but is the metamorphosis of woman into an idol of the cult of motherhood – a veritable Venus of Willendorf. Thus Van Herk's Judith remains the Other – in de Beauvoir's sense – retaining her mythical attributes. As in the original, her Judith reverses positions, but also as in the original, van Herk's Judith achieves no reversal in society.

The biblical Judith creates a matriarchal fantasy in her ritual dance and song, but submits to the prevailing patriarchy. Likewise, van Herk's Judith creates a utopian fantasy which is restricted to the small domain of her farm – to her society of sows – which nevertheless leaves the outside patriarchal world unaffected. Both Judiths become the matriarchs of their households, rather than rulers of a new societal order. Ultimately, van Herk does not escape mythology; her reversal – as is true of all reversals – only succeeds in reflecting and strengthening the original myth, and continuing the dichotomy of male/female, subject/object relationships. Placing the woman on top, as van Herk does, still reflects this dichotomy; it does not break away from the traditional structure of the myth. Van Herk's *Judith* does no more than restate Barthes' contention: 'Il apparaît donc extrêmement difficile de réduire le mythe de l'intérieur: car ce mouvement même que l'on fait pour s'en dégager, le voilà qui devient à son tour proie du mythe: le mythe peut toujours en dernière instance signifier la résistance qu'on lui oppose.'<sup>47</sup> Van Herk resists the myth but the myth reappears within her resisting narrative.

## NOTES

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3. Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme précédé de la littérature comme une tauromachie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).
4. Sarah Kofman, 'Judith ou la mise en scène du tabou de la virginité', *Littérature et psychanalyse*, No. 3 (Octobre 1971), p. 10.

5. Friedrich Hebbel, *Judith* (1840) in Theodor Poppe, ed., *Hebbels Werke* (Berlin and Leipzig: Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong, n.d.), II, pp. 41-100; Johann Nestroy, *Judith und Holofernes* (1847) in *Komödien 1846-1862* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1970), pp. 552-64; Georg Kaiser, *Die jüdische Witwe* (1904) in *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: G. Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1931), pp. 245-425; Jean Giraudoux, *Judith: Tragédie en trois actes* (Paris: Grasset, 1932).
6. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 1990), p. 39.
7. *Le Deuxième sexe I* (Paris: Gallimard, Livre de Poche, 1976), p. 193.
8. *Judith* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978); all quotations are from this edition.
9. Fede Galizia, *Judith*, 1596, John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida.
10. Elisabetta Siriani (attributed to), *Judith*, 17th century, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.
11. Rosemarie Menschick, *Judith* (Munich: Buchhandlung Leohaus, 1921).
12. de Beauvoir, p. 193.
13. Jean Steinmann in *Lecture de Judith* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1953), p. 9, quotes Rev. Randon as having written 'L'auteur préconise sans scrupule la duplicité, la coquetterie et l'assassinat'.
14. Mary Coote, 'General Discussion', in Luis Alonso-Schökel, *Narrative Structure in 'The Book of Judith'*, Protocol of the Eleventh Colloquy: 27 January 1974 (Berkeley: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1975), pp. 53-54.
15. Alan Dundes, 'Comment', in Alonso-Schökel, p. 29.
16. A.M. Dubarle, *Judith: Formes et sens des diverses traditions: Tome I: Etudes* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1966), p. 166.
17. Manfred Durzak, 'Ein Trauerspiel des Dramatikers Rolf Hochhuth. Anmerkungen zu seinem *Judith*-Stück', *Hebbel-Jahrbuch*, 1978, p. 13. (my transl.)
18. Coote, 'Comment', in Alonso-Schökel, p. 21.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
21. Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature: A Brief Introduction* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1963), p. 92, refers to the Greek text rendered by the Syriac version which translates Bethulia as 'Home of the Phallus'.
22. Daly, p. 79.
23. Denise Carmody, 'Judaism', in Arvind Sharma, ed. *Women in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 187.
24. Jean Vinatier, *La Femme: Parole de Dieu et avenir de l'homme* (Paris: Les Editions ouvrières, 1972), p. 85.
25. Turner uses this term in many of his writings. In his *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), Chapter IV is entitled 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in "Rites de Passage"'.  
 26. Hans Mayer, *A Study of Life and Letters*, Denis M. Sweet, tr. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), p. 55.
27. For an analysis of ambiguity and danger, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; rpt. London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1984).
28. Mayer, p. 5.
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30. Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 14.
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32. *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, Matthew Gumpert, tr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 131.
33. 'Anthropological Approaches to the Study of the Bible During the Twentieth Century', in Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycok, eds., *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 11.
34. Daly, p. 39.
35. Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 320.
36. Daly, p. 78.
37. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 41, author's emphasis.
38. Daly, p. 79.
39. Nancy Huston, 'The Matrix of War', in Susan R. Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 120, reaffirms the link which the psychoanalyst Charles Berg established between man's long hair and his unrestrained sexuality, as well as man's short hair and his military strength.
40. Daly, p. 79.
41. (Paris: Minuit: 1969).
42. Dundes, p. 29.
43. Geneviève Idt, 'Sartre "mythologue": du mythe au lieu commun', in Pierre Verstraeten, introd., *Autour de Jean-Paul Sartre: Littérature et philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 125.
44. *Mythologies* (Paris: du Seuil, 1957), p. 251.
45. Daly, p. 44.
46. Bal, p. 131.
47. Barthes, p. 243.